

'I'm completely squeaky clean': An interview with Matthew Hooton

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Exceltium boss, commentator and philosophy student Matthew Hooton.
Photo: Tina Tiller for the Spinoff

He's a lot of things: a commentator, political PR guy, Twitter scrapper, dad, recovering alcoholic – even Mongolian ambassador. But Matthew Hooton's main focus at the moment is chalking up a philosophy Master's in London. Toby Manhire meets one of the most fascinating – and polarising – characters in NZ politics

Life is a like a game of Trivial Pursuit, said Matthew Hooton. You seek to collect the wedges. "So there's family. Work. Political commentary. There should be exercise but there hasn't been since February. And there's academia. And there is also the alcohol and drug recovery. So those are the pieces of pie."

For most of us, it's the commentary piece that defines him. The eloquent, sometimes angry, dependably provocative commentator from the free-market right of politics. The *bête noire* of very many on the other side. The founder and owner of Exceltium, a political PR firm, a role which his detractors contend should disqualify him from his position as a high-profile voice on the national broadcaster, RNZ. The perpetual antagonist, always in a scrap somewhere – whether it's the left versus right radio set-piece against Stephen Mills, or a weird legal battle with the eccentric publisher of the NBR, or a heated late-night exchange with an anonymous Twitter user.

But for Hooton, the primary focus in recent months has been the academic part of the pie. Silver-haired and 46, Hooton has embarked on a Masters in philosophy at Kings College London. Not that the trifling detail of being thousands of miles away in an ivory tower has done much to deny New Zealanders his many opinions on politics. He's stood down from his RNZ slot while in London, but kept up the columns for the New Zealand Herald and Metro – not to mention those belligerent #nzpol tweets deep into the London night. And hardly had he stepped off the plane in Auckland for his end-of-year break before he was back on Newstalk ZB and the familiar seat at RNZ. All of this week he's been hosting New Zealand's biggest talkback programme on ZB.

On the eve of his departure for the UK Hooton swung by the Spinoff office in Morningside. The interview ran for almost two hours. "If I had a client who talked to someone with a tape recorder for that long, I'd fire the client for refusing to follow instructions," he said. For someone about to leave his business and dive into a postgraduate degree at one of the world's most prestigious universities he seemed very relaxed. Apart, perhaps, from a handful of moments where he bristled like a cat at some affront or other, and issued the Hooton death stare.

Like when I asked about whether his role as a political commentator – arguably New Zealand's best known commentator, and in one of the most prominent political slots of the week, with Kathryn Ryan on RNZ Nine to Noon every Monday – was essentially an extension of his political public

relations firm, Exceltium.

“No,” he glared. “It’s harmful to it.”

He held the stare for a couple of seconds, then blinked. “It’s harmful to it in the sense that some people just don’t want to be associated with anyone in the media, some potential clients. What else? It takes time. And it can piss off the very policymakers that you may then want to talk to.”

It wasn’t entirely without its advantages, however. “The benefits of it are that my name is known. So that if I call a Beehive staffer or a business person they know who they’re talking to.”

But, he said, “the two roles are completely distinct because of the nature of the work. I mean, people in the media, and particularly people on Twitter, have a perception that it would matter what’s being said on the Nine to Noon programme in a commercial sense. And it really doesn’t.”

‘They get grin fucked and nothing happens’

Hooton’s career, if it you can call it a career at all, is less Trivial Pursuit disc and more carousel – a merry-go-round of academia, political advisor, travel and PR. “Except for when I was in my 20s I’ve never had a job, not in the way most people would think about it,” he said.

He was mid-law-degree in 1990 when he was offered a summer speech-writing job in the office of then education minister Lockwood Smith. Another big beast of the National Party, his local MP Doug Graham, advised him to forgo the political gig and take a summer course towards his degree instead. “He said, ‘You’ll never go back to university if you do. You’ll get addicted to politics.’ So in a way I’ve proven him wrong.”

He largely stuck around until 1996, when parliament was thrown into a post-election paralysis Winston Peters and NZ First, holding the balance of power, negotiated the first MMP government.

“We had to go to work to be paid. But we weren’t allowed to do any work

constitutionally, right?"

Hooton says "right?" a lot, as a kind a rhetorical punctuation mark.

"So it was great for the first couple of weeks you got to work about 10, office morning tea, out for a boozy lunch, back to the office at four to check out, right? But it got a bit much so I booked a one-way ticket to Mumbai. I backpacked through India and China and Mongolia and Sri Lanka for about a year and then ran out of money and went back for a year in Wellington to work for Lockwood, who [had become] trade minister."

(His month in Mongolia came to a fruition of sorts more than two decades later. After a series of return visits, including to advise on the formation of the Mongolian Green Party and "to look at a mad idea to set up a sheep farm to supply the Saudi market", he ended up appointed as [Mongolia's honorary consul in New Zealand](#).)



Toby Manhire attempts a death stare of his own in conversation with Matthew Hooton. Photo: Tina Tiller

Hooton quit parliamentary employment again after the 1999 election – "I

just thought that government wasn't going anywhere and it was that destructive environment really" – and after another trip to Asia with his now wife Cathy Wood, he got into the consulting game. There was work for the Seafood Industry Council. The Apec task force. The Treaty Tribes Coalition. For PWC on the much-trumpeted peril of the Y2K bug. "It was a real threat we solved so that was really good," he deadpanned. And he stumbled, in effect, into the head of communications role at Fonterra. "I was completely out of my league."

After another year of study in 2003, with a baby on the way, it was time to set up shop, and so began Exceltium. Given what – and who – Hooton knew of New Zealand politics and media, it seemed "a reasonably easy way to earn money". Unlike most similar enterprises, however, Exceltium was not based at walking distance from the Beehive. Not even in Wellington at all.

"Our original point of difference was: just as Wellington was profoundly ignorant of Auckland, Auckland was profoundly ignorant of Wellington," said Hooton.

"Bureaucrats, it doesn't matter how many committees are set up in Wellington, they never understand Auckland or its business community and similarly the Auckland business community has just no comprehension of the Wellington bureaucracy and the political process and what drives it, right?"

"And so the concept was that we would provide that knowledge to the Auckland business community of what Wellington was interested in."

The big client – "that made us" – was the Kyoto Forestry Association. "They ended up delivering about \$1.6 billion to the client in carbon credits. That was in the dying days of the Helen Clark government. They did a U-turn and allowed the clients members to participate in the emissions trading scheme."

And what does Exceltium, well, *do* exactly?

"The bread and butter product is the people that come in thinking they have

got a problem thinking that someone in Wellington can solve it for them," he said.

"They think that if they only go into the media and attack the minister all will be well. And we normally look into the issue, see what various stakeholders might think about the issue and usually we tell the client to do nothing, and to focus on their core business."

It's a compelling business model: advise people to do nothing, then bill them for it.

"Usually going to war with the government and demanding a regulatory change or whatever just doesn't stack up as a project, right?" he said.

"You have to fight for a very long period of time, you have to be prepared to be shunned by the government of the day, if you really want to fight them. There is a business model in this industry where primarily the client comes along and you set the meeting up with the minister and the prime minister and the client gets to make their pitch. And it's like a dating service. And we do that from time to time. Sometimes the client just wants to get their view across to the policy maker. But it usually fails. Usually the person gets grin fucked by the politician and nothing happens."

Grin fucked?

"Obviously John Key and Helen Clark and Jacinda Ardern are the best at this, that's why they're prime ministers. But most politicians do this. It's all a friendly meeting, a smiley meeting, grinning, and it's all: 'these are fantastic ideas you brought to Wellington today and we are very excited about your presentation. We think you've really identified some very important issues. We're going to get a lot of work under way on this project and thank you so much for coming today.'

"And then nothing at all happens. Without the application of political pressure that's usually how those types of meetings with politicians go. We don't recommend going to see the minister because we don't think it achieves anything. Usually.

"If the client is worthy of meeting a minister the minister will meet that client in New Zealand without us buying coffee for people and our business model is then to say the minister has to understand if they simply try to grin fuck you then you'll take the issue wider."

Wider means the media.

"Then we call the Spinoff and say look at this terrible thing, thousands of jobs are being missed out on."

(For what it's worth, Hooton has never called me on behalf of a client.)

The point, said Hooton, is that Exceltium is not in the business of lobbying.

"The main thing is most lobbying is based upon maintaining relationships and friendships with Beehive staff. Both in this government – even more so than the government, but also the last government – there are very close friendships between some lobbyists and very senior members of the government. And there was often a two-way flow of staff and that's what their business model is based upon. But we consciously decided not to do that. I mean, being in Auckland you can't. You can't compete with that because you're not bumping into one another on Lambton Quay."

'It was on the fourth step up our stairs at home: from now on I will never drink again'

"It's one of most joyous and exciting things that I've ever done," said Hooton, when I asked if he was happy to talk about his alcoholism, and quitting drinking.

"It's one of the things that people don't understand that the act of not doing the drug is as fun as doing it. But that's what stops them from stopping."

It used to be that Hooton was famous – or infamous, to many – for his prodigious boozing. For liquid lunches that ran into tomorrow, full of scuttlebutt and scheming.

"Yeah that's right. And that was fun. It was. But that was then and it was out of control and it was damaging my life and it was putting everything I valued at risk. And there was an intervention by two very good drinking buddies. At the Wine Loft on Shortland Street," he said.

"If you're going to conduct an intervention has to be somewhere where the person's comfortable."

That same night, his wife, Cathy confronted him, too.

"She booked to me to see the GP and then I went and made a commitment to myself. I didn't tell anyone about it. It was on the fourth step up our stairs at home: *from now on I will never drink again*. And then I went to the GP and got put on some really cool drugs. So good they only give you one at a time ... They just calm you.

"I booked to see a prominent Remuera based psychologist and also was introduced to [CADS](#) [Community Alcohol and Drug Services], just up on New North Road. I loved that process. And I still go every Wednesday. They're the best people you'll ever meet. Particularly the P people. People who've got themselves off P are quite extraordinary people. Most people don't ... Most of the alcoholics succeed. Most do. But it's fun. You meet new people who you have to keep a different perspective. It's great."

Maybe because he's about to fly out for the UK, he raises drinking on planes. "It's one of the weird things ... The plane takes off. And they bring out the drinks trolley. Let's say you're on a really good airline in a Muslim country. It's a very critical ritual. You think about it because to them that's like the plane taking off and out comes the heroin.

"I think about that when I'm on a plane because that's usually a challenge point. And the challenge points with alcoholism are easy to overcome. But you know there are people that relapse at times. It's the thing I worry about most is relapsing when I get on a plane and the free champagne comes around. Right? But because you're aware that's going to happen it's not a problem. But it's quite a strange thing when you think about it. Shows how

embedded alcohol is in our society.”

Does he have an addictive personality? “Yeah,” he said, taking a sip of water. “But I’m not sure what the term means. I can see cycles. Certainly a Big Mac will lead me to think about a Big Mac the next day.”

What about Twitter? Is that a glib comparison? It seems like he spends a lot of time there.

“That’s terribly addictive. I’ve got to get off that. When, not through the law but through mental health services, the world is finally free of drugs and alcohol the people that work as therapists do not have to worry about their incomes because Twitter will fill that space.

“It has the same characteristics as a slot machine, Twitter, in that it gives you an immediate response. So that’s what that’s why it’s addictive. And it gives you an illusion of being connected with people when you’re not. And it amplifies the environment you think you’re in. Kathryn Ryan from Radio New Zealand, she said: ‘You do understand that when you’re on Radio New Zealand you might be being listened to by over 100,000 people and our politics slot is extremely popular with our listeners. So why do you worry what six losers have to say on Twitter?’ But human nature is that you do, don’t you? Well, I do ...

“I wonder if people will be able to modify social media behaviour and be less aggressive towards one another. I doubt it because I think it’s like driving. When you’re actually alone but you’re in a social environment – we’re not evolved to do that.”

‘It’s bad-faith criticism’

Hooton is widely regarded on the New Zealand left as a malevolent force in politics. A murky muck-raker. A villain. In part that’s because of repeat appearances in Nicky Hager’s books *The Hollow Men* and *Dirty Politics* – characterisations that Hooton dismisses as “propaganda”, even if he accepts that some of the revelations in the earlier book were sufficiently

embarrassing to make him curl up in the foetal position.

But the most persistent and compelling criticisms levelled at Hooton – and to some extent at his employee, Ben Thomas, who, full disclosure, is a Spinoff contributor and core cast member of the Gone By Lunchtime podcast – centre on the potential for the commercial interests of their clients to be advanced via political commentary.

That gets the death stare.

“I would never do that on behalf of a client and I never have.”

But it’s possible, even in theory, clearly.

“Not really, because you’d be caught,” he said.

“I’ve done this for 13 years. Once I forgot to put a disclaimer on an NBR column. It was on the TV news as a result. You don’t think for 13 years I’ve done this and haven’t been absolutely squeaky clean. I’m completely squeaky clean. And I’ve had to be for 13 years. It just simply wouldn’t otherwise be able to continue the way it has.”

But it’s a reasonable criticism, I started to say.

“It’s bad-faith criticism. It’s not it’s not meant usually to be constructive criticism or concern about the integrity of the political process. The people who make that criticism are doing it in an effort to reduce the critique I might put of their friends in politics.”

But they’re legitimate questions.

Death stare.

“And they get asked and they get answered all the time. I mean, you know, we usually boast if we’re working for a client. It’s not a secret.”

Why not just then name your clients?

"We do. They're on the website."

All of them?

"The ones that I'm proud of."

They're not all on the website. Among the 13 clients [listed](#), there's no sign, for example, of the perennially beleaguered ACT Party, which Hooton has acknowledged (by way of disclosure, to be fair) was a client in the leadup to the last election.

He later alluded to that relationship, saying: "A very interesting piece on the Spinoff by David Seymour."

It was a reference to an excerpt from the *Stardust and Substance* collection of essays about the last election.

Please elaborate, I said.

"No I can't," he said, and then he did.

"It's a good piece. It discusses the strategic disagreements that occurred among the various advisers to ACT."

Reading back over the piece, there is no explicit reference to any strategic disagreement, but Seymour does alight on "a deeper strategic problem", which is presumably what Hooton was hinting at. "We treated policies as products we had to sell," said Seymour, "but we didn't pay enough attention to the brand of the entity selling them."

'It's just a phrase. It was good for their ratings'

"I think the real corruption in the New Zealand media comes from so-called academics frankly and Labour Party operatives embedded in the media," Hooton said, swivelling the spotlight away from his own operation with a flourish.

"If I look at the people in PR who commentate and the people who work for

unions I don't think they represent any threat to the integrity of the New Zealand media compared with people who are basically political activists posing as journalists."

The essence of the problem, he argued, is that "in New Zealand – and it's a worldwide problem – commentary has moved into reporting. It's terrible. When I started doing political commentary 30 years ago the basic facts of what might have occurred were established by reporters and reported in quite a bland almost boring manner. And then there were the commentators. One of the big risks, one of the problems that's occurred, and Fox News is the most notorious, is the merging of reporting and commentating. That's a far greater issue than some PR person or union boss popping up and saying what they think."

"Corruption" was the word he chose in August last year to describe TV3 political editor Tova O'Brien's reporting on the Simon Bridges expenses story – which, of course, ended up mutating into the Jami-Lee Ross saga. His remarks at the time seemed – how to put it? – a bit hysterical.

"Oh, it's a phrase," he breezed. "They enjoyed that and ran it on the news. It was good for their ratings."

So it was just hyperbole?

"It's hyperbole. That was taken from a talkback context and they put it on the news, right? It's all fine. But that's the biggest risk in the New Zealand media I think – where does reporting stop and where does commentating begin?"

That proclivity for hyperbole, or to be more charitable, dramatic licence, is at the heart of what both delights so many editors and producers, and revolts detractors. David Seymour might not have understood his brand, but clearly Hooton knows his own. It's combative, often contrarian; often declamatory – there's rarely a caveat in sight.

That means he gets things wrong. (The second result on a Google search for Exceltium is an Andrew Geddis [blog post](#) headlined "Why Matthew

Hooton is wrong – again”.) But he gets more right than a lot of his counterparts. In one of Hooton’s few press profiles, with [the Herald in 2014](#), the interviewer recounts “laughing my ... head off” at his “suggestion Shane Jones might jump ship to New Zealand First” – a prediction which was “not so much spinning as stirring”. And we all know how that turned out.

And while he has collected plenty of enemies over the years – it’s hard to imagine Steven Joyce or Murray McCully enjoying a Fanta with him, for example – he seems also to have the ability to say perfectly vicious things about people yet they’ll remain contacts.

“But that’s astute,” he said. “As a PR person I would always advise a client to engage – you can’t possibly lose by engaging, so that’s smart. There might be people I like and admire and I will undoubtedly be gentler on them. That’s the nature of opinion. But I am very proud that I’ve been at least as hard on people who I would tend to agree with philosophically than those that I disagree with.”

It’s fair to say that political loathing for him is sprinkled across the main parties. “I was pretty strongly excluded from the Key government because of my criticisms of – ironically, something revealed by Nicky Hager – the use of the SIS to smear the leader of the opposition. I thought Key should have resigned over that and I said so on the radio. Also I attacked him strongly over the ponytail. And of course I led the criticism of Murray McCully’s dodgy sheep deal.

“So I have a better relationship currently with some senior staff in the current prime minister’s office than in the previous one. You know, there was a notification that if I contacted anyone in John Key’s beehive, the prime minister’s office had to be alerted immediately. So I don’t think that any of those people consider me a partisan cheerleader.”

While Hooton spends a lot of time talking about the importance of the “median voter”, the politicians he admires are not by nature pragmatists. “Lockwood Smith, Tim Groser, Chris Finlayson, Doug Graham, Laila Harre, Ruth Richardson obviously, Sue Bradford. They’re the people we need in our

parliament. Not the flakish, publicity-seeking type people that have risen to prominence in recent governments. They're the people I like and admire. Very intelligent people with a sense of mission. And they are sadly lacking in our parliament at present. I think Sue Bradford or Ruth Richardson can be much prouder of their contribution in New Zealand than Key or Ardern or Clark."

It'd be hard to argue that Hooton didn't badly underestimate Ardern, however. In a 2015 [Metro column](#), he called the then list MP "pretty bloody stupid". He wrote: "She should be judged on whether she has leadership qualities. The answer is a resounding no." She had shown "no political acumen at all".

Hard to argue, but Hooton does. "I don't think I did. I've had cause to wonder if I got it wrong. But I'm not sure I did. Time will tell."

'Huge, historic things were being done and we were at the centre of it'

Life is like a game of Trivial Pursuit, but occasionally you have to pause to take a call from your lawyer. In brief: Todd Scott, the [outspoken publisher of NBR](#), fired Hooton – via Twitter, naturally – after a column he'd written about the National Party leadership race. Steven Joyce took exception to parts of the column, and served legal papers. Scott was defiant: he would stand behind the column. Hooton essentially shrugged his shoulders, and apologised to Joyce. This apparently inflamed Scott, who in turn served Hooton, demanding that he cough up for Scott's costs in defending the Joyce action. All of which left Scott in the perplexing position of standing up for his columnists while suing the very same columnist.

After laughing at the strangeness of it all, Hooton said: "The nature of these things is if it goes to trial that won't happen in two years, I wouldn't have thought. And then could be a year waiting for a judgment. I mean if he wishes to go down that path over that period of time and has the resources to fund it then obviously he's entitled to his day in court ... I mean I'm not sure the plaintiff [Joyce] is so keen on that. The defendant seems to want to

go to court.”



Matthew Hooton on TVNZ's Eye to Eye programme in 2008

And what about politics proper: is there any place in the pie for Matthew Hooton, MP? There was, after all, talk some years ago, when the ACT Party was going through yet another leadership catastrophe, that Hooton might rescue the classical liberal cause. “That was in my drinking days,” he said.

So it was a real prospect then? “Not really. To some extent. I’m very dismayed by the increasingly ideas-free form of politics ... There used to be clear distinctions between what various parties would stand for and there tends not to be now.”

But he’s disinclined, at 46, to jump into parliamentary politics. “My goal is absolutely the – what are we calling it – the wedges in the pie,” he said. “And that is not conducive to that.”

But it was once?

“That’s why you go to Wellington. That’s why all the young staffers do it.

The first step to becoming a prime minister.”

Hooton, too. “Of course! President of the world! And also there was a huge sense of mission back then. I was talking to a very distinguished former politician still active in the media and he said: you guys, you thought you were all Milton Friedman. And this was meant to mock us. But it was also a compliment. Compared with the environment around the staff now – really, their goal is to be on *Jono and Ben*. Or they all want to be like Max Key. Right?

“That’s how it’s changed in that time. That’s not to say it’s better or worse. I mean we were all mad and we thought we were leading some global revolution. That was what the 80s and the early 90s were like in politics. Huge, historic things were being done and we were at the centre of it here in little old New Zealand. And I don’t think that is how New Zealand governments now think.”

‘This is necessarily pretentious, but you asked the question’

Imagine you’re at a tutorial or something at Kings College, London, I said. Imagine you’re introducing yourself to your fellow students. How would you describe yourself, where you fit in media and politics?

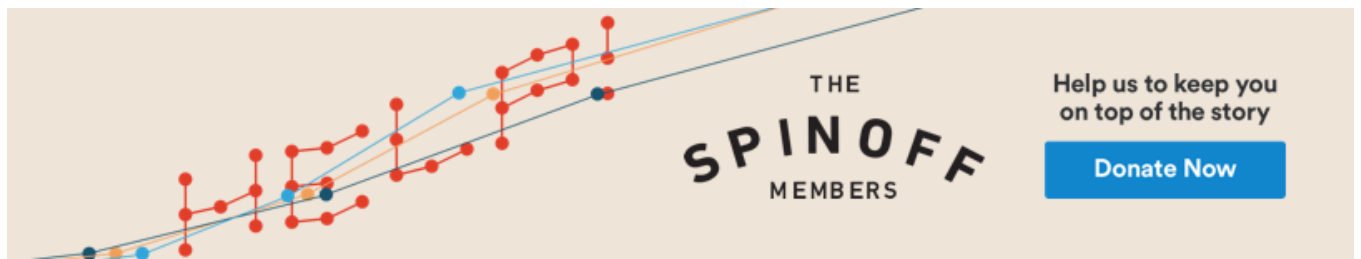
Half a death stare: “Well I wouldn’t.”

But imagine that you did.

“I’d just say I do a little bit of writing and commentary and PR in New Zealand. They’re not interested in that.”

I’m just trying to find a way to get you to articulate what you see your function being in the NZ political and media landscape.

“My function.”



After a pause of six or seven seconds: "This is necessarily pretentious, but you've asked the question. I think that I've been involved in politics and business and the media for nearly 30 years, and I think that – and this is a boring old man answer, as well – we all have different functions. When we're 20 we can be the young radical Milton Friedman. I think that one of my roles now is to see events and give them greater meaning by putting them in the context in which they occur, from a well-known perspective. And that's increasingly rare in the New Zealand landscape.

"And my long term ambition is to teach philosophy at Auckland University, to continue to have a public profile, to continue to have a couple of clients, PR clients, to travel a lot with my family, get back into the running, and walk up to Radio New Zealand once a week at 11am on a Monday, with my Zimmer frame, eventually."

Teaching, travel, running, Zimmer frames – is the patron-wolf of rightwing New Zealand punditry mellowing? If so, blame the philosophy.

Shortly before Christmas, after Hooton had returned from the UK for a break, I found myself seated at the same table as the Masters student at the Hamilton Press Club. He chatted amicably with Simon Bridges, and with the speaker of the day, Golriz Ghahraman. The course was going fine, he said. He was enjoying it. Following Ghahraman's address, an audience member launched into a question – a vexed, tortuous question about life, the universe and political discourse. Hooton leaned over and whispered to me: "Shall I break it to him that nothing means anything?"

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